

HIV / AIDS

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On Capitol Hill, the Battle for AIDS Funds Heats Up November 9, 1991

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By Karen De Witt

WASHINGTON, Nov. 8 — Magic Johnson's stunning announcement on Thursday that he is infected with the AIDS virus and is quitting professional basketball is energizing lobbying efforts aimed at increasing Government spending on AIDS research and education. It is also providing political grist for Democrats, who are using the AIDS issue to attack the Bush Administration's domestic policy on health.

Lawmakers have done a political turnaround on the AIDS issue in the last several years, moving from embarrassed hesitancy at voting for spending money to combat the disease to staunch support for Federal aid. Almost \$2 billion in Federal funds were appropriated for AIDS programs for fiscal 1992, up from \$5.5 million in fiscal 1982, when such programs were first financed.

Budget Almost Set

The shift resulted from constituent pressures, lobbying efforts and the magnitude of the health-care crisis. But whether the poignancy of Johnson's disclosure will move the issue further and get Congress to provide more money immediately to fight the epidemic is doubtful.

"I don't think during this cycle," said Representative Steny H. Hoyer, Democrat of Maryland, noting that Congress had all but completed action on medical research programs for fiscal 1992, which started Oct. 1.

Hoyer is chairman of the House Democratic Caucus and a member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Education, which oversees legislation that finances AIDS research and education.

"The labor-health bill has already been voted on and essentially the funding levels are pretty much resolved this year," he said. "But there is no doubt that somebody as prominent and as popular as Magic Johnson indicating that he is now HIV positive and is not in the so-called at-risk population will heighten the threat and will have an effect on maintaining the level of funding," Hoyer said.

But Representative David R. Obey, Democrat of Wisconsin, who also serves on that committee, said Federal aid for the disease should be based on science, not on whether a movie star or sports figure had a particular disease.

"If we allocate funding of disease on that basis, we'll have a high old time politically, but we won't be doing much for science," he said.

Johnson announced Thursday that he would retire from the Los Angeles Lakers because he had contracted the human immunodeficiency virus, HIV, which causes AIDS. He implied that he was infected through heterosexual activity.

On Capitol Hill, the issue is complicated by a bitter lobbying war between advocates for AIDS programs and those lobbying for more money for cancer research and diseases that affect women, like breast cancer. Some lawmakers noted that Federal aid for AIDS is markedly above the levels for most other diseases.

Johnson's announcement also offered an opportunity for partisan politics, as Democrats accused the Bush Administration of not paying enough attention to the disease.

"There has been a failure of Presidential leadership on AIDS," said Representative Henry A. Waxman, the California Democrat who heads the Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health and Environment. "The Bush Administration has been pushed by the right wing into trying to make doctors criminals, talk about quarantines, and gone along with them to the point that they've censored questionnaires about sexual practices. In recent days, we've seen talk about good AIDS patients and bad AIDS patients. This has been a very destructive effort."

Waxman went on, "One of the biggest disappointments is that we have not been able to get funding that would make testing, counseling and early intervention and drugs that are needed available."

Bush Defends Efforts

President Bush, who was in Rome at a meeting of NATO leaders, said Johnson was "a hero to me" and defended his Administration's efforts on AIDS.

"I think we're doing well as an Administration, but if I need to do more and Barbara does to express the concern we feel, we'll do it," Bush said at a meeting with reporters.

And Health and Human Services Secretary Louis W. Sullivan, in a statement issued by his Washington office, said, "I am very heartened by the announcement that in the months and years ahead, Magic Johnson will help carry a life-saving message to young people across our nation."

Several lawmakers have called for more money for AIDS research and education. The Bush Administration puts its financing for AIDS at \$4 billion, but that includes Medicare and Medicaid money paid for care of AIDS patients.

A Plight of Thousands

But several members of Congress said the plight of a prominent sports figure like Magic Johnson was the same as that of thousands of less-famous people who have AIDS or catastrophic health problems. Several said they hoped Johnson's announcement would encourage more Government money to fight the disease.

Senator Alfonse M. D'Amato, Republican of New York, said Johnson's disclosure was "a clarion call for Congressional action."

And at a news conference presided over by Representative Maxine Waters, Democrat of California, Belinda Rochelle, a program director at the AIDS Action Council in Washington, said Johnson's case would become a powerful force for change.

"It's the dawn of a new era in AIDS education and awareness," she said. "With Magic Johnson you feel like you have a friend who told you he is HIV positive and that sparks an interest in the disease."

Others said Johnson's disclosure would galvanize black and Hispanic people and homosexuals, whose anger and frustration over the treatment of people whose anger and frustration over the treatment of

people with AIDS would translate into ousters in 1992 of officials who they think are racially insensitive and homophobic.

"It brings so many charged political issues together -- domestic policy issues, health care reform, the lack of health care access for people of color communities -- and it wraps it in the jersey of a sports and youth hero," said Robert Bray, director of public information for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "That is a potent political weapon for 1992."